

# Patriarchal authority and the normalization of violence: local actors' gender narratives in Türkiye

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how local actors in Türkiye construct gender norms and rationalize violence against women within everyday social discourse. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants, including tradespeople, headpersons, and imams. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) locally produced gender regimes, shaped by exalted masculinity, sacred motherhood, stereotyped femininity, and controlled freedom; (2) family as a moral and social foundation, emphasizing traditional gender roles, male protective-disciplinary authority, and return-to-family narratives during crises; and (3) cultural rationalization of gender-based violence, including beliefs in “deserved” violence, social disorder as justification, and a perceived impossibility of change. Findings demonstrate how patriarchal norms are reproduced through everyday moral claims and social expectations, legitimizing gendered control and sustaining tolerance toward violence. The study contributes to ongoing debates on gender, power, and the cultural maintenance of violence by highlighting the role of local actors in reinforcing Türkiye's gender order.

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## Introduction

Violence, which has been attempted to be explained by many different theories and perspectives and whose manifestations are in different ways, has continued its existence today as a phenomenon with very old roots (Kara, 2022). This phenomenon has a complex feature, containing many similar and divergent dynamics. One of the most common types of violence is human-on-human violence, or from a gender-based perspective, male violence against women. Violence against women is a human rights violation with many individual and social causes and consequences. Violence against women began to attract attention as an important problem with the influence of feminist movements in the late 1960s and the early 1970s and was addressed in many fields such as criminology, psychology, anthropology, law, sociology, and many more (Erbay, 2019). Today, the epidemiology and

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etiology of this problem correspond to a large area and attract the attention of several disciplines.

The most important source of violence against women is social gender roles and attitudes toward women. Especially in societies where violence as physical and psychological pressure exists on a legitimate basis as a means of authority and discipline, the situation is taken to more serious levels with attitudes based on gender roles (Güreşçi, 2021). Gender is defined as the assignment of certain social, cultural, and moral roles and duties to men and women based on their sex. Kara and Serpen (2023) define gender as one of the most severe and difficult forms of violence to address, and as a structure that generates, nourishes, reinforces, and perpetuates violence. The symbiotic relationship between gender and violence against women contributes to the persistence of this serious problem and constitutes a structural factor that makes it difficult to address the issue.

There are differences in the prevalence and predictors of violence against women in different countries and societies (Türkkan & Odacı, 2024). For example, inequality in gender-based power relations is one of the most influential social determinants of health. These inequalities determine whether people's needs are recognized, whether they have a say in their lives and health, and whether they can realize their rights (Er, 2023). These differences also require broader social, cultural, and economic contexts to understand violence and approach the problem. When we look at the problem, the status of women in patriarchal societies is not only complex but also has ideological and structural characteristics. In other words, the roles, beliefs, norms, and values that determine women's status in society are as effective as their access to social institutions and the roles they play in the construction of these institutions. These factors determine women's positions on a gender basis and give rise to gender-specific meanings and duties for women. This distinction creates and triggers factors contributing to the occurrence of violence against women.

Violence against women is a significant social issue in Türkiye. According to the 2024 National Survey on Domestic Violence Against Women, 37.5% of women aged 15–59 years reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partners at least once in their lifetime. The prevalence of violence increases as education levels decrease; among women with no education or only primary school education, the rate is 43.3%, whereas for those with a high school education or higher, it drops to 24.7% (TUIK, 2024). Additionally, a study conducted by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in 2015 found that 36% of women experienced physical violence and 12% experienced sexual violence (KSGM, 2016). Femicide data further underscore the severity of the issue: the 2023 Annual Report of the We Will Stop Femicides Platform (KCDP, 2023) recorded at least 418 women killed, 60% of whom were murdered with firearms. These statistics highlight the widespread nature of violence against women in Türkiye and the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to address this issue.

Violence against women is not merely an individual behavior; it is a complex phenomenon in which social values, cultural norms, and power relations intertwine. When the normalization of violence extends even to the streets and is combined with the sanctification of family and marriage, it results in both behavioral and cognitive unresponsiveness (Koçoğlu, 2019). Shared values and traditional norms reinforce this mechanism, producing social legitimacy for violence (Özpinar & Acar, 2022). Consequently, violence becomes visible beyond the private sphere, extending into the public domain and

permeating all areas of life. This indicates that violence should not be addressed solely as a problem occurring between individuals but as a reflection of power relations that sustain the continuity of social structures.

The fact that violence has become normalized as a frequently encountered behavior, making itself felt in different manifestations and becoming commonplace, creates the need to understand how and in what form the attitudes and opinions regarding this problem are held by different segments and groups of society. In this context, it is important to analyze the perspectives of local actors, such as tradesmen, local business owners, headmen, and imams, regarding violence against women. It was chosen within the scope of the study because the target audience is quite large in Türkiye, and the concept of legitimacy is formed based on the common attitude, approval, and conformity views of the majority. Local actors are numerous in society. This group is often the primary eyewitness to incidents of violence against women, especially those occurring within the family or close relationships. They frequently leave the household and sometimes even the neighborhood and may document or share these incidents through written, visual, or social media. This raises the question of how the group perceives the problem and what solutions it considers to be appropriate.

In many local communities, actors such as tradespeople, neighborhood heads, and imams occupy influential positions in producing and circulating everyday moral discourses. These actors function as informal opinion leaders who mediate social norms, resolve local conflicts, and shape community perceptions of family, gender roles, and morality. Because of their symbolic authority and everyday interactions with community members, their narratives play an important role in legitimizing or challenging prevailing gender norms. Despite this influence, the perspectives of such local actors remain underexplored in the literature on violence against women. By focusing on these actors, this study aims to illuminate how patriarchal meanings are reproduced in everyday community life.

This study contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, it shifts the analytical focus from individual attitudes toward violence to everyday discursive practices through which gender norms are produced and reproduced in local contexts. Second, by examining the perspectives of local actors, such as tradespeople, neighborhood heads, and imams, this study highlights the role of informal community authorities in shaping moral interpretations of gender relations and violence. Finally, the study provides qualitative insights into how patriarchal meanings are embedded in everyday narratives and social expectations, thereby illuminating the cultural processes through which violence against women may become normalized in the community life in Türkiye.

This study aimed to examine their opinions, draw a descriptive picture, and find answers to the following research questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How do local actors (tradespersons, headpersons, and imams) perceive women?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** What are the views of local actors (tradespersons, headpersons, and imams) on violence against women?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** What are the views of local actors (tradespersons, headpersons, imams) regarding the solution to violence against women?

## Method

This qualitative study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of local actors' subjective experiences regarding the image of women and perceptions of violence against women. In this context, a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method, was adopted. The phenomenological approach seeks to uncover the meaning of individuals' subjective experiences related to a specific phenomenon and reveal the essence of these experiences. This approach provides a deep perspective for understanding psychological and social phenomena and is particularly effective in investigating complex social realities (Frankel & Devers, 2000). The phenomenological approach focuses on phenomena that we are aware of but do not have a deep or detailed understanding of. By nature, qualitative research does not aim to produce generalizable results; rather, it seeks to offer rich descriptions and meaningful insights into experiences that emerge within a specific social context.

### Participants

The selection of tradespeople, neighborhood heads, and imams was theoretically informed by their roles as visible and influential actors in the community's everyday life. These actors frequently interact with community members and often serve as informal mediators in local disputes, family issues and moral discussions. Because of their symbolic authority and close contact with residents, they play an important role in shaping and reproducing community-level understanding of gender roles and family relations. Therefore, their perspectives were considered particularly relevant for examining how gender norms and attitudes toward violence against women are interpreted and reproduced within everyday social contexts.

In this study, snowball sampling, a type of purposeful sampling method, was used (Krysiak & Finn, 2015). The study sample consisted of 22 participants, including 10 women and 12 men, aged between 25 and 55 years. The sample size was determined based on the concept of theoretical and thematic saturation, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), meaning that data collection continued until no new information or themes emerged.

Participants were included in the study if they signed an informed consent form, which provided detailed information about the purpose and procedures of the research, and were willing to voluntarily share their experiences. The inclusion criteria required that participants be over the age of 18, be local actors residing in the study area, and not have any physical or mental condition that would hinder their participation in the research. The participants' ages, gender identities, professions, working hours, education levels, and marital statuses are presented in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned sequential identification codes (e.g., P<sub>1</sub>, P<sub>2</sub>) instead of using their names.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic information about participants

	Gender identity	Age	Education	Marital status	Occupation	Working time (year)
P <sub>1</sub>	Woman	25	Bachelor's degree	Single	Tradesperson/ Restaurant	6
P <sub>2</sub>	Man	32	High school graduate	Married	Tradesperson / Clothing store	12
P <sub>3</sub>	Woman	39	Primary school graduate	Married	Tradesperson / Florist	16
P <sub>4</sub>	Man	23	College graduate	Single	Tradesperson / Restaurant	3
P <sub>5</sub>	Woman	36	High school graduate	Married	Headman	3

P <sub>6</sub>	Woman	41	Primary school graduate	Married	Tradesperson / Jeweler	20
P <sub>7</sub>	Man	39	Bachelor's degree	Single	Imam	11
P <sub>8</sub>	Woman	28	High school graduate	Single	Tradesperson / Glassware seller	8
P <sub>9</sub>	Man	38	High school graduate	Married	Headman	4
P <sub>10</sub>	Man	42	Bachelor's degree	Married	Imam	17
P <sub>11</sub>	Man	45	High school graduate	Married	Headman	3
P <sub>12</sub>	Man	46	Bachelor's degree	Married	Imam	20
P <sub>13</sub>	Woman	44	High school graduate	Married	Headwoman	3
P <sub>14</sub>	Man	35	Bachelor's degree	Married	Imam	7
P <sub>15</sub>	Man	54	High school graduate	Single	Tradesperson / Shopkeeper	22
P <sub>16</sub>	Man	39	High school graduate	Married	Tradesperson / Restaurant	21
P <sub>17</sub>	Woman	34	College graduate	Married	Hairdresser	12
P <sub>18</sub>	Man	57	High school graduate	Single	Headman	9
P <sub>19</sub>	Woman	44	College graduate	Married	Clothing store worker	23
P <sub>20</sub>	Man	35	High school graduate	Married	Tradesperson / Restaurant	11
P <sub>21</sub>	Woman	40	Bachelor's degree	Single	Tradesperson / Clothing store	12
P <sub>22</sub>	Woman	29	Primary school graduate	Single	Restaurant worker	10

### Data collection tools

In this study, data were collected through a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers and subsequently evaluated and interpreted. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are applied using open-ended questions. The questions were arranged according to a specific interview protocol and encouraged participants to provide detailed and comprehensive responses.

The interview form was developed based on a relevant literature review, and a pilot application was conducted to test the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Based on the feedback obtained from the pilot application, necessary revisions were made to the form, ensuring that the final version facilitated more efficient data collection.

The form consisted of four main sections: The first section gathered the participants' socio-demographic information. The second section included questions about the participants' evaluations of female identity. The question regarding "perceptions of female identity" aimed to explore how female participants' social perceptions of female identity shape their thoughts on violence and gender. A similar question posed to male participants sought to reveal different perspectives on female identity. The third section included questions about participants' evaluations of violence against women, aiming to uncover their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding violence against women in society. The fourth section explores participants' views on whether the phenomenon of violence against women can be solved.

## Data collection process

The study data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants. The face-to-face interviews were conducted between February 2024 and May 2024 and lasted for an average of 70 minutes. Each face-to-face interview was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The recordings were transcribed, and the originals were destroyed by the researchers to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in the interview transcripts.

During the data collection process, the researchers visited the companies where the participants were employed to provide information about the study and request their informed decision regarding participation. 22 of the 25 people interviewed stated that they volunteered to participate in the research and that being audio recorded would not pose a problem for them. Three of the interviewees stated that audio recording would be a problem, and therefore, they did not want to participate in the study. Since the participants wanted to have their workplace as the meeting place, they were interviewed at their workplace and at a time convenient for them. It was observed that female participants were willing to participate in the research, while male participants were more cautious about participating. It was striking that the participants expressed their opinions with different arguments after the audio recording ended. Approaches such as "let's talk about our real ideas" were observed, recorded by the researcher, and considered important for data analysis.

## Data analysis

The transcripts of the in-depth interviews were read and analyzed several times at different times by the researchers. MAXQDA 2020 software was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in the data. Thematic analysis enables data to be organized in the smallest dimension and described in-depth (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In the data analysis process, the audio recordings taken during the in-depth interviews were first transcribed, and upon being listened to again by the researchers, they were grouped under concepts that could be summarized in accordance with the purpose of this research. Frequently mentioned expressions in the coding were labeled, the secondary code was evaluated, and combined with similar codes. Finally, the main themes and subthemes were created. A table of codes was created based on the codes obtained during the research process and is presented in the *Results* section (Table 2) to help readers understand the distribution of codes. Since one of the researchers had prior experience working in the field related to the research area, they had more familiarity and thus freedom in categorizing and coding the sub-outputs of the study.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, the researchers independently reviewed the transcripts and discussed the emerging codes and themes until a consensus was reached.

## Ethics

The ethical suitability of the research was determined by the decision of the Hitit University Non-invasive Publications Ethics Committee dated 27.01.2020 and numbered 2020-20. The data of this study were obtained within the framework of the ethical rules specified in the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, and the interviews were conducted

after receiving voluntary and informed consent from the participants. They indicated that they fully understood the purpose, process, potential pitfalls, and benefits of this research study. Additionally, participants were informed that they would not receive any payment for participating in this study. The information collected from and about the participants was kept confidential, and they were informed that the study would be published as a research paper, to which they granted their consent. The data collected were not made available to third parties.

## Results

It has been observed that local actors living in Ankara (tradespersons, headpersons, and imams) have diverse perspectives on violence against women. Because of the analysis, three main themes were identified: locally produced gender regime, family as the moral and social foundation, and cultural rationalization of gender-based violence (Table 2). The theme of a locally produced gender regime encompasses sub-themes such as exalted masculinity and protective authority, sacred motherhood, stereotyped femininity, and controlled/captive freedom, reflecting the gender norms and power relations that shape everyday social interactions and expectations. The theme of family as the moral and social foundation includes traditional gender roles, male protective-disciplinary responsibility, and return-to-family discourse during crises, emphasizing the centrality of family as both a moral ideal and a mechanism of social control. The theme of cultural rationalization of gender-based violence consists of belief in “deserved” violence, perceived social disorder as a justification, and a sense of insolubility and hopelessness, revealing how gender-based violence is often legitimized through cultural narratives and collective perceptions of moral decay. The data analysis was structured around these themes, and each theme was illustrated with participants’ narratives to highlight how local discourses contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of gender inequalities.

**Table 2.** Themes and sub-themes related to participants’ narratives

Theme	Subthemes
Locally Produced Gender Regime	Exalted masculinity and protective authority Sacred motherhood Stereotyped femininity Controlled/Captive freedom
Family as the Moral and Social Foundation	Traditional gender roles Male protective-disciplinary responsibility Return-to-family discourse during crises
Cultural Rationalization of Gender-Based Violence	Belief in “deserved” violence Perceived social disorder as a justification Sense of insolubility and hopelessness

### Locally produced gender regime

The findings indicate that gender norms among local actors were produced and sustained through moral, religious, and socio-cultural expectations. Participants framed gender as a hierarchical structure in which masculinity represented authority and femininity symbolized obedience, patience, and sacrifice. Within this locally produced gender regime, womanhood is evaluated through four interrelated lenses.

### Exalted masculinity and protective authority

Male authority was positioned as natural, God-given, and socially necessary. This authority was frequently justified through a discourse of protection, suggesting that men must lead, discipline, and “guide” women to secure family and societal order. Protective language often masks control and disciplinary power. One headman expressed this view as follows:

Men are stronger and more capable than women. A woman needs a man to guide her; otherwise, problems appear. (P<sub>11</sub>, Headman, 45)

This statement reflects a belief system in which masculinity is associated with strength, capability, and leadership, and where women’s autonomy is seen as potentially destabilizing. The comment illustrates the reproduction of a gender hierarchy in which male authority is normalized and upheld as protective and corrective of women’s behavior. Some participants challenged this hierarchy, emphasizing its restrictive nature for women and the limitations it places on their participation in public life. A headwoman expressed this view as follows:

When I became a neighborhood headwoman, they said that I could not do it. The belief that men can do everything limits our potential. (P<sub>13</sub>, Headwoman, 44).

This statement highlights resistance to dominant gender norms and demonstrates how women in leadership positions confront socially constructed assumptions regarding male competence. This underscores that the exaltation of masculinity functions as a barrier to women's full civic participation and reinforces patriarchal expectations regarding authority and public responsibility.

### Sacred motherhood

Participants described motherhood as the central source of a woman's identity, value, and social legitimacy. The ability to give birth and raise children is framed as a divine responsibility, positioning women primarily in nurturing and caregiving roles. In this narrative, motherhood is depicted not only as a biological function but also as a moral duty that defines the meaning and worth of womanhood. One participant articulated this ideal as follows:

Becoming a mother is the most beautiful thing for women. A mother is sacred. A woman matures when she becomes a mother and understands life more deeply. (P<sub>9</sub>, Headman, 38)

This perspective emphasizes motherhood as a spiritual and developmental milestone, reinforcing the belief that a woman's primary purpose is fulfilled through nurturing and family care. Such discourse contributes to the social expectation that women must embrace motherhood to be complete and respected.

Simultaneously, several participants questioned the elevation of motherhood as the sole meaningful identity for women, drawing attention to the exclusionary and restrictive consequences of this belief. These views challenge the assumption that women's lives revolve around maternal roles. One participant articulated this critique as follows:

Some women do not want children or cannot have children. Does this mean that they are not valuable? Motherhood is meaningful, but limiting a woman only to being a mother is wrong. (P<sub>1</sub>, Tradesperson, Woman, 25)

This reflection underscores the tension between idealization and constraints. While cultural narratives praise mothers, they simultaneously marginalize women who do not conform to these maternal expectations. The participant’s statement illustrates emerging resistance to essentialist definitions of womanhood and calls attention to the diversity of women's identities and life choices.

### Stereotyped femininity

Participants frequently defined womanhood based on rigid behavioral and physical expectations. The "ideal" woman was described as modest, reserved, and restrained in her movements and appearance. Clothing, posture, tone of voice, and public presence emerged as moral indicators, suggesting that femininity is closely tied to notions of social order and respectability.

Women who deviated from these expectations were framed as more vulnerable to judgment and even violence, implying a form of conditional safety dependent on compliance. One participant reflected this view as follows:

If a woman behaves properly, she will not have any problems. There are dangerous people outside, so she must be careful about how she speaks, dresses, and acts. If she protects herself, nothing will happen to her. (P<sub>7</sub>, Imam, Man, 39)

This comment reflects a discourse that places the responsibility for avoiding violence on women, reinforcing gendered self-discipline and situating women's safety within patriarchal boundaries. This statement suggests that violations of gender norms justify social or interpersonal consequences, subtly blaming women for the harm inflicted upon them. Some participants criticized these expectations and highlighted how endurance and sacrifice are romanticized as virtues for women, especially in the context of marriage. A tradesperson expressed this as follows:

My mother was beaten by my father, and people praised her for staying with him. They said she was patient and strong for not leaving the house. They almost glorified her suffering. (P<sub>8</sub>, Tradesperson/Glassware Seller, Woman, 28)

This statement underscores how societal admiration for patience and obedience reinforces gendered pain. Endurance under hardship is a celebrated trait, reinforcing traditional ideals and silencing efforts to challenge oppression. The narrative demonstrates that stereotyped femininity not only limits women's freedom but also normalizes their pain as a duty.

### Controlled/captive freedom

In this subtheme, womanhood was framed as being conditionally free. Participants described a context in which women could participate in public life and make personal choices only within socially defined and male-dominated boundaries. Freedom was acknowledged, yet simultaneously restricted through moral expectations, family honor, and perceived societal threats.

This conditionality indicates that women's autonomy was not outright rejected but rather permitted only when aligned with patriarchal norms and did not challenge male authority or communal values. Women were "allowed" independence as long as it was practiced within invisible limits. One participant reflected on this experience as follows:

It feels like an invisible and untouchable prison. You are supposedly free, but you are not. When you do what society, especially men, expect, there is no problem. When you try to do what you want, your captivity appears. (P<sub>1</sub>, Tradesperson/Restaurant, Woman, 25)

This expression illustrates how freedom is framed not as an inherent right, but as a privilege granted by patriarchal authority. The participants emphasized that deviation from gendered expectations triggers social control and sanctions, revealing the fragile and conditional nature of women's autonomy.

The discourse of protection often emerged as a justification for these boundaries. Participants suggested that limitations are placed "for women's own good," implying that

danger lies outside the approved norms and spaces. Such framings reinforce gendered dependency and position men as guardians, whose authority legitimizes restrictions on women's mobility and behavior.

Together, these narratives reveal a socio-cultural logic that maintains the gender hierarchy not only through overt dominance but also through the subtle moralization of protection and propriety. Women's 'freedom' is thus structurally contained, normalized, and socially rewarded only when aligned with patriarchal expectations.

### Family as the moral and social foundation

Participants consistently framed families as the central and sacred institutions of social life. Within this ideological framework, gender roles were viewed not only as personal expectations but also as necessary conditions for preserving the societal order and moral continuity. The family was positioned as a protective space in which stability and morality were maintained, while deviations from prescribed roles were believed to threaten household harmony and wider social cohesion.

### Traditional gender roles

A dominant narrative emphasized that predefined gender roles ensure balance and prevent conflicts. Women were expected to accommodate domestic responsibilities and emotional labor, while men were expected to act as authority figures and decision-makers. Adherence to these roles was portrayed as essential for family integrity, whereas role transgressions were seen as potential triggers of disruption. One participant expressed this view as follows:

When roles are clear, there are no problems. When a woman enters a man's area and performs his duties, the balance is broken. Where balance breaks down, chaos ensues. (P<sub>7</sub>, Imam, Man, 39)

This statement highlights the belief that any shift in gender boundaries is inherently destabilized. It reflects a social order in which harmony is constructed through hierarchy rather than equality and where women's role expansion is framed as a threat rather than progress.

Other participants challenged this perspective, describing gender roles as burdensome and limiting, particularly for women who must navigate responsibilities without agency.

Everything in my life was decided for me: what to do and how to live. When you do not have choices, how can you say that gender roles are good? (P<sub>17</sub>, Hairdresser, Woman, 34)

This expression illustrates the constraints imposed by prescribed roles and suggests that stability may be achieved at the expense of women's autonomy and well-being.

### Male protective-disciplinary responsibility

Across interviews, men's authority was described not only as a privilege but also as a duty to protect, discipline, and lead the family. Women's emotional and behavioral regulation was rationalized as a moral obligation. Male stress, burden, and responsibility were invoked as explanations for controlling behavior, including anger and, at times, violence.

We carry a heavy burden. When you come home, you want peace. If there is a problem, you get angry and shout at them. It is normal. Not everyone can handle this burden. (P<sub>12</sub>, Imam, Man, 46)

This view frames male authority and occasional aggression as inevitable consequences of responsibility. Such discourse legitimizes male dominance and positions emotional expression of frustration as acceptable within family boundaries, reinforcing patriarchal norms that mask power asymmetry as duty.

A contrasting perspective highlights the psychological cost of male role expectations, arguing that excessive pressure on men harms both genders by constructing an inflexible model of masculinity.

### Return-to-family discourse during crises

It was observed that the participants frequently invoked the family as the ultimate refuge during times of conflict or moral uncertainty. When discussing social challenges, including economic pressures or interpersonal problems, the proposed solution is often a return to traditional family values. As one participant expressed,

When everything feels uncertain, returning to your family is the safest thing. Ultimately, family is where one belongs. (P<sub>3</sub>, Tradesperson/Florist, Woman, 39)

Another participant stated,

The state or society cannot protect you. Only family stands by you in your worst moments. (P<sub>13</sub>, Headman, 44)

A similar sentiment was articulated by another participant who explained,

If things fall apart, you must first rely on your family. Society and governments change, but families remain the same. (P<sub>20</sub>, Tradesperson/Restaurant, Man, 35)

These statements illustrate that the family was idealized not only as a moral unit but also as the primary mechanism for coping with broader social risks. Such framing positions the family as a protective shield and moral anchor, while simultaneously downplaying the role of public welfare systems or collective responsibility. This discourse may obscure structural inequalities and individual needs by emphasizing private rather than systemic solutions, thereby reinforcing a cultural narrative in which social resilience is expected to arise from familial ties rather than institutional support.

### Cultural rationalization of gender-based violence

This theme captured narratives in which gender-based violence was explained, excused, or normalized through cultural and moral reasoning. Violence was frequently framed as a response to perceived deviations from socially accepted gender roles and moral codes. Rather than being defined as a violation of rights and dignity, violence was positioned as a symbolic corrective mechanism embedded in the household authority, community expectations, and moral order.

Participants often relied on familiar cultural idioms, religious references, and traditional expectations when explaining the incidents of violence. Within this narrative structure, responsibility was shifted from the perpetrator to the woman, who was described as having provoked or “deserved” the act of violence. This approach created a subtle but persistent legitimization of violence, where harm became imaginable, explainable, and morally justified under certain circumstances.

Broader concerns regarding social deterioration, loss of moral values, and societal instability were frequently invoked to rationalize strict gender control and punitive behaviors. These narratives align personal acts of violence with perceived threats to social cohesion, suggesting that intervention should occur through the restoration of traditional norms rather than systemic protections.

This thematic pattern demonstrates how cultural narratives can function to obscure structural inequalities and shift attention away from institutional responsibilities by naturalizing violence within everyday moral discourse.

### Belief in “deserved” violence

This subtheme reflects narratives in which gender-based violence was rationalized as an expected or legitimate response to women’s perceived deviations from traditional gender norms. Violence was framed as a result of women failing to fulfill expected roles related to obedience, respectability, and modest conduct. Through this logic, women become responsible for preventing harm by remaining within socially sanctioned boundaries. Such narratives shift accountability away from perpetrators and normalize violence as a disciplinary tool for maintaining the patriarchal order. As one participant described:

If a woman constantly talks back and ignores her husband, problems arise. A household requires respect. Sometimes, people lose control. (P<sub>15</sub>, Tradesperson/Shopkeeper, Man, 54)

This statement connects violence to the expectations of obedience and positions male aggression as a natural reaction to perceived disrespect, thereby justifying harm as part of domestic regulation. Another participant emphasized women’s moral responsibility:

When a woman behaves properly, no one raises their hand. However, if she crosses the limits and breaks the peace of the family, reactions occur. (P<sub>12</sub>, Imam, Man, 46)

Here, violence is constructed as a corrective response required to preserve family harmony, reinforcing the idea that the burden of avoiding harm rests on women’s compliance. In contrast, a minority of views rejected this rationale:

Nothing justifies harming women. People blame women to avoid facing their own weakness. (P<sub>3</sub>, Tradesperson/Florist, Woman, 39)

This perspective challenges the dominant narrative by framing violence as rooted in male insecurity rather than women’s behavior, although such arguments appeared less frequently in the data.

Taken together, these narratives position violence as morally or socially justified when women are perceived to deviate from the prescribed gender roles. This logic reinforces patriarchal power by normalizing punitive control and shifting responsibility from perpetrators to women.

### Perceived social disorder as a justification

This subtheme reflects the tendency to explain gender-based violence through narratives of social disorder, moral decline, and weakening communal norms. Participants frequently framed violence as a reaction to broader societal instability rather than as a violation of women's rights. From this perspective, violence is not interpreted as the responsibility of the perpetrator; instead, it is rationalized as a product of deteriorating social values and a lack of control mechanisms. This framing dilutes accountability by situating violence within general social chaos rather than individual agency. As one participant expressed:

People have changed. There is no respect left for the people. When order disappears, anything can happen, including violence. (P<sub>16</sub>, Tradesperson/Restaurant, Man, 39)

This statement connects violence to perceived moral decline and positions it as an outcome of weakened social norms, rather than a deliberate act influenced by gender hierarchies. Another participant stated the following:

These days everyone acts as they want. There are rules, but nobody follows them. That is why women become targets. (P<sub>19</sub>, Clothing store worker, Woman, 44)

Here, violence is justified through a discourse of lawlessness. Women are positioned as vulnerable not because of gender inequality but because the social order is believed to be eroding. Another participant stated the following:

In the past, the elders guided us. Now young people do not listen to anyone. That is why we see so many bad incidents. (P<sub>7</sub>, Imam, Man, 39)

This statement attributes violence to generational disobedience and the loss of traditional authority structures, implying that gender-based violence emerges when traditional social control mechanisms weaken.

Taken together, these narratives place responsibility on broad social change instead of on those who perpetrate violence. This interpretive pattern risks masking the gendered nature of violence by presenting it as a generic social disturbance rather than as a structured expression of male authority and control. Such discourses risk normalizing harm by framing violence as a predictable outcome of a disordered society, rather than a preventable violation rooted in gender inequality and power imbalance.

### Sense of insolubility and hopelessness

This subtheme captures the participants' belief that gender-based violence is a persistent and unresolvable social reality. Violence is frequently framed as an inevitable consequence of cultural norms, political conditions, or economic pressures. From this perspective, prevention is viewed as unattainable, and efforts toward change are perceived as futile. Such narratives contribute to the normalization of violence by presenting it as a deeply rooted cultural reality, rather than a preventable social injustice.

Participants expressed resignation toward the possibility of meaningful change, emphasizing their collective exhaustion and the structural barriers. This stance may function as a psychological defense against confronting systemic gender inequality while reinforcing passive acceptance of ongoing harm. As one participant expressed:

There are so many problems in this country. No one has time to care about women's issues. People worry about their own lives first. How can such violence be addressed in this situation? (P<sub>22</sub>, Restaurant Worker, Woman, 29)

This statement connects gender-based violence to broader political and economic instability, portraying it as secondary to other social concerns and, therefore, unlikely to receive sufficient attention. Another participant stated:

You can talk about respect and rights all you want, but nothing changes. Women will keep being hurt. This society does not change easily. (P<sub>7</sub>, Imam, Man, 39)

Here, hopelessness is linked to perceived cultural immutability. Violence is framed as an inherent element of social life, discouraging proactive interventions and reinforcing the idea that change is unrealistic. A third participant reflected on the same issue:

We try, we speak up, but nobody listens. Everyone stays silent unless something big happens. Then everything goes back to normal. (P<sub>19</sub>, Worker Clothing store, Woman, 44)

This comment illustrates cyclical public attention and emotional fatigue, highlighting how temporary outrage fails to translate into structural changes.

Taken together, these narratives portray gender-based violence as a fixed, inevitable condition. This sense of hopelessness obstructs policy advocacy, collective mobilization, and investment in prevention, ultimately sustaining the status quo by discouraging belief in the possibility of change.

## Discussion

The construction of the "ideal woman" operates as a powerful mechanism for sustaining patriarchal norms across societies (Holt, 2010). In this study, the participants consistently

articulated expectations regarding women's behavior, emphasizing modesty, emotional responsibility, and alignment with traditional family values. Such narratives reflect what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) term "emphasized femininity," in which women are positioned to maintain male authority and social harmony through compliance and self-sacrifice. Previous research has similarly demonstrated that both women and men may internalize and reproduce gendered expectations, reinforcing existing hierarchies (Echebarria Echabe & Gonzalez Castro, 1999). The findings of this study echo this pattern: local actors framed womanhood as being tied to moral duty, motherhood, and controlled autonomy. Within the cultural context of Türkiye, these norms interact with strong ideals of family unity and social stability, contributing to a gender regime in which women's limited roles are normalized as natural and culturally appropriate.

The theme of *exalted masculinity and protective authority* reflects deeply embedded social beliefs that position men as natural leaders and guardians within family and community structures. Patriarchal thinking, which assumes men's superiority and women's subordination, continues to inform gender expectations, consistent with the literature on male dominance in social hierarchies (Roose & Cook, 2022). Biological narratives, such as references to testosterone and "natural" male strength, are frequently mobilized to legitimize men's authority and assertiveness and normalize women's passivity (Holt, 2010; Lippa, 2005). Such assumptions reinforce a gender order in which male control is framed as necessary for social stability and for women's safety. In this logic, men become both protectors and disciplinary figures, and women are expected to accept guidance and constraints as part of the moral social order. This dynamic has been shown to contribute to the intergenerational transmission of aggression and tolerance for violence against women, particularly in cultural contexts where traditional gender norms remain strong (Sadock, Sadock & Ruiz, 2015; Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2011). The findings of this study align with these observations: participants frequently associated masculinity with responsibility, strength, and authority and femininity with obedience, modesty, and emotional duty. This locally produced gender regime reinforces hierarchical relations and legitimizes gendered power asymmetries under the guise of moral protection and of social harmony.

In many societies, womanhood is closely tied to motherhood, and this study demonstrates that the ideology of sacred motherhood continues to shape expectations of women. Participants emphasized motherhood as a central marker of female worth, reflecting a cultural logic in which women who are not mothers may be perceived as incomplete, unsuccessful, or morally deficient. Such beliefs create pressure on women to fulfill maternal roles not only physically but also emotionally and with visible devotion, consistent with the argument that motherhood is idealized as a joyful and self-sacrificial duty rather than a shared social responsibility (Badinter, 1992). Despite its moral elevation, the ideology of sacred motherhood does not protect women from harm. Research has shown that mothers are frequent targets of spousal violence (Spaccarelli et al., 1994), that violence may continue or intensify during pregnancy (Silva et al., 2018), and that boys' aggression may be directed at their mothers within the household (Stewart et al., 2006). The narratives in this study align with these findings, illustrating how the cultural glorification of motherhood coexists with practices that subordinate women and normalize violence, even within the maternal role. Rather than safeguarding women, the discourse of sacred motherhood reinforces gendered obligations and silences women's autonomy, leaving them vulnerable to both social judgment and familial harm.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that, unlike hegemonic masculinity, there is no singular form of hegemonic femininity; instead, women are positioned within “emphasized femininity,” which emphasizes compliance, subservience, and the fulfillment of men’s desires and family needs. This aligns with the stereotyped femininity observed in this study, where women are expected to meet domestic and emotional obligations while subordinating their own autonomy. Participants’ narratives suggest that such expectations facilitate men’s perception of women as their property, legitimizing control and, at times, violence (Özateş, 2009; Siddiqui, 2014).

The intersection of stereotyped gender roles and domestic violence creates heightened vulnerability among women. Men, positioned as protectors, can simultaneously be perpetrators, with intimate partners accounting for a significant proportion of global femicides (Stöckl et al., 2013; FRA, 2014). The study also shows that women face compounded burdens: they are expected to fulfill traditional domestic responsibilities, maintain professional roles, and perform according to gendered ideals, which intensifies the risk and impact of violence (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024; Giménez-Nadal et al., 2018, 2019; İlkkaracan & Gülçür, 1996).

These findings underscore how controlled or captive freedom operates: women’s mobility, choices, and agency are constrained by social expectations and male authority, reinforcing a locally produced gender regime that sustains inequality and normalizes harm to women. This situation can also be interpreted through the concept of symbolic violence, which may, in certain contexts, translate into direct forms of violence, as symbolic norms such as honor may legitimize and reproduce violence against women (Hamzaoglu & Konuralp, 2019a).

From birth, men are positioned at the top of the gender hierarchy, which is reflected in the perception of men as the natural protectors and enforcers of family and social order. Participants frequently linked men’s protective and disciplinary roles to both authority and the justification of violence, framing male responsibility as inherently tied to maintaining family stability (Gibbbs, 2012). Similar patterns have been documented in the literature: male perpetrators are often perceived as more effective enforcers of household norms, and social institutions, including courts, may rely on stereotypes about marriage, family, and femininity in their judgments (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Crocker, 2005).

Violence against women was frequently rationalized as a necessary disciplinary tool, particularly when women were perceived to violate the expected gender roles. Participants described such acts as “deserved,” linking moral or behavioral deviations to punitive responses (Kelly-Hanku et al., 2012; Löbmann et al., 2003). This aligns with Copelon’s (1994) observation that spousal abuse is often culturally reframed as a duty or demonstration of masculinity rather than a violation of human rights. Women are thus constructed as the primary targets of violence, while public conscience and social institutions frequently remain silent, reinforcing systemic impunity (Hilberman, 1980; Murvartian et al., 2023; Rekha, 2007).

The participants also expressed a pervasive sense of hopelessness regarding the resolution of gender-based violence. As in other contexts, structural and social complexities, ranging from limited legal protections to entrenched cultural norms, contribute to the perception that meaningful change is unlikely (Moore et al., 2019; Greenhalgh & Papoutsis, 2018). The inadequacy of criminal sanctions, highlighted in both participant narratives and the existing literature, further undermines accountability, reflecting broader international struggles to recognize domestic violence as a human rights violation (Moore, 2002; Dobash

& Dobash, 2015; García-Del Moral & Dersnah, 2014). Recent discussions have also highlighted how honor-based violence in Türkiye is shaped by the interaction between cultural norms and legal frameworks, particularly in debates surrounding the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (Hamzaoğlu, 2024; Hamzaoğlu & Konuralp, 2019b). This withdrawal has been interpreted in different ways in public debates, including as part of a broader political discourse that emphasizes traditional gender roles and appeals to conservative constituencies, which may further influence perceptions of and responses to violence against women is perceived and addressed.

## Conclusion

This study examined how local actors in Türkiye construct gender norms and rationalize violence against women in everyday social discourse. Drawing on a phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews with tradespeople, headpersons, and imams, the findings reveal how gendered meanings and expectations are reproduced through ordinary social interactions and locally shared moral frameworks. The analysis identified three main thematic patterns that illuminate the social processes through which gender-based inequalities and tolerance for violence are sustained.

First, the findings demonstrate the presence of locally produced gender regimes characterized by exalted masculinity, sacred motherhood, stereotyped femininity, and controlled forms of freedom. These patterns indicate that gender norms are maintained through culturally embedded expectations that define appropriate roles, behaviors, and boundaries for women and men. Second, the family emerged as a central moral and social institution that shaped perceptions of gender relations. Traditional gender roles, male protective and disciplinary authority, and narratives emphasizing a return to the family during crises were frequently articulated, reinforcing the normative framework through which gender relations are interpreted. Third, the study revealed the cultural rationalization of gender-based violence. Participants' narratives reflected beliefs that justified or normalized violence under certain circumstances, including notions of "deserved" violence, references to social disorder, and expressions suggesting that change is unlikely or difficult to achieve.

Taken together, these findings show how patriarchal norms are reproduced and legitimized through daily discourse and social expectations. The perspectives of local actors play an important role in shaping how gender relations and violence against women are understood, discussed, and normalized in local contexts. By focusing on these everyday discursive processes, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on gender, power, and the cultural reproduction of violence in Türkiye and highlights the importance of addressing not only legal and institutional dimensions but also the social narratives that sustain gendered inequalities.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study is based on a qualitative sample of local actors who voluntarily participated in the research; therefore, the findings should be understood within the specific context of the study rather than as representative of the broader population in Türkiye. Second, the relatively limited sample size and focus on participants primarily from Ankara may not fully capture regional differences in attitudes toward gender norms and violence against women. Third, the data relied on participants' perceptions and narratives, which may not

entirely reflect the broader structural and statistical dimensions of violence against women in Türkiye. Future research may benefit from including larger and more diverse samples and from combining qualitative insights with national statistics, institutional reports, and comparative data to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

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## **Data availability statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## **Artificial Intelligence (AI) statement**

Generative AI tools were used solely for linguistic refinement and proofreading of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, interpretation, and scientific content of the study.

## **Ethics approval statement**

The ethical suitability of the research was determined by the decision of the Hitit University Non-invasive Publications Ethics Committee dated 27.01.2020 and numbered 2020-20.